

Karen L. Jessup

Traveling Globally, Contributing Locally

Roger Williams University's Students in England

Preservation education is not a spectator sport. And it is not for those who like to stay clean, warm, and dry. This is often a stunning revelation to preservation students on their first field assignment. These realities of professional practice are readily apparent to Roger Williams University's historic preservation students studying abroad. For the last four years, historic preservation majors and architecture students have worked intensively in England on sites of remarkable architectural and landscape significance, investigating conservation challenges and actively responding to problems of decaying stone, redundant agricultural complexes, inappropriate development, and politicians sometimes hostile to conservation and well-designed contemporary architecture.

Through the Preservation Studio—a 15-week intensive field project upon which the entire required semester abroad is based—program participants and Roger Williams faculty join with colleagues in the United Kingdom in pursuit of solutions to (often, quite literally) thorny preservation problems. Working collaboratively and individually, students fan out into the archives and libraries which house local history collections, tromp through mud and the effluvia left by generations of farm animals, and endure the indignities of measuring buildings and documenting landscapes in the frequently cold, wet, windy conditions of England's "green and pleasant land."

Eric Lusgarten and studio mates at Wroxton College, England.



Few now question the educational merits of field studies. Even fewer doubt that immersion in the philosophical and practical challenges faced by preservationists is vital to understanding the scope and nature of the profession. At Roger Williams, our preservation educators are also committed to the principle that service to community can be an important means of fostering students' learning, not only about historic preservation, but about themselves and the world which welcomes them after they complete their studies.

Beginning with the establishment in 1976 of RWU's Historic Preservation Program, community internships have been a hallmark of our teaching. From two decades of successful experiences with organizations and agencies throughout New England and beyond, it seemed natural to consider ways to take our students yet further out of the classroom, to live for a semester in a foreign culture with the inherent educational benefits of these opportunities, and provide preservation services to new constituencies in English towns, villages, and countryside. The faculty, with strong input from program majors, conceived the Preservation Studio, a five credit experience, as a worthy experiment. Two of the most challenging recent Preservation Studios in England focused on historic resources in quite different contexts.

In spring 1994, 16 preservation and two architecture students settled in at Preedy's Farm, a late-medieval complex comprising thatched liass limestone animal shelters, a large stone barn, and a brick Georgian manor house, all still in original use. Owned by the former local chairman of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, Preedy's Farm is in the Village of Tadmorton, North Oxfordshire, and situated close to a major interchange of Britain's ever-expanding motorway system. With cultural tradition and the architectural landscape of many of England's villages threatened by intensive housing development for workers now commuting long distances via car, Tadmorton is specifically pressured. Preedy's Farm was for sale, thankfully by a family with strong conservation sentiments who wanted to convey title with some restrictions. Would it become the scene of yet another cookie-cutter housing development?



*Roger Williams
University students
learn from a
thatcher.*

*Eric Lustgarten
measuring the Hen
House at Preedy's
Farm. Photo by
Christopher
Gumbrecht.*



The Preedy's Farm studio objective was to first analyze existing conditions of the buildings' materials, evaluate the special character of the landscape, and understand the planning context of this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Next, we devised development scenarios that would respect the special qualities of this Grade II* agricultural property and, at the same time, recognize that a more intensive, and non-agricultural, use of the landscape is inevitable.

With assistance from conservation officers, representatives of English Heritage, The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and preservation architects well-experienced with stone construction, students divided themselves into teams to tackle the work which consumed much of our attention for three months. Those concentrating in architectural conservation undertook the materials' analyses, developing a sophisticated knowledge of the composition, forces of degradation, and stabilization of thatch, brick, and limestone. Preservation planning students became inti-

mately involved with Britain's planning laws and policy guidance for historically significant architectural, landscape, and archeological resources. Some delved into oral history, others researched maps and other graphic sources, and still others evaluated landscape conditions from the perspectives of scenic views, plant material, topography, and land use traditions.

Reams of information and over 350 photographs of current conditions formed the basis from which all Preservation Studio participants, faculty included, proposed development scenarios specifically suited to Preedy's Farm and the Village of Tadmarton. A statement of philosophical context defining the parameters of each proposal was a significant student responsibility.

At the completion of the project, we formally presented our work to the property owner and to critics from some of Britain's most highly regarded heritage organizations. Students, especially those with enhanced computer literacy, aided in the compilation of a weighty binder documenting the project with photographs and narrative material. We donated a copy of our findings to the county library's local history collection, the district conservation office, and Preedy's Farm's owner, as well as to most of the studio critics.

In the end, did we make a difference at Preedy's? It may yet be too soon to properly evaluate this, but we know the property owner relied on our study in his presentation to the District Council and its planning staff when they considered how to interpret heritage regulations, and architects for the new owners are using the binder and our photographs to aid in the development of their reuse proposals.

The other Preservation Studio involved an abandoned and partially unroofed Gothic Revival manor, Grimsbury House, situated by an industrial estate adjacent to the slip road leading to the rapidly developing town of Banbury, in North

*The RWU group
rest atop
Glastonbury Tor.*





Architect Russell Wright explains the engineering of timber framing.

Oxfordshire. Banbury, a regional retail and industrial center with the largest cattle market in Europe, is the home of Suchard Nestle where tons of coffee are roasted every year. Even with the legendary Banbury Cross, until recently the town has been decidedly well off the tourist trail. We completed our work in December 1995, and again provided for the owner, a development firm in Manchester, and the local community a binder of our findings and recommendations.

Grimsbury House lived up to its name, which quickly became a joke to those of us who spent so much of our time treading carefully around wood pigeon carcasses and negotiating our way beneath fungal 'fruiting bodies' thriving on the wet ceilings. I rarely had to remind students to don their hard hats on site; the view when we looked up was as grim as what we saw at our feet.

Grimsbury is identified by local authorities as important to economic development for the future of the region. For the studio, student teams formed in much the same way as they had at Preedy's Farm. Preservation planning, documentary research, and existing conditions analyses provided us with challenges which occupied 15 preservation students for the bulk of their semester in England. This time we were joined by a complement of 13 students from Roger William's Architecture Program and my faculty colleague, architect Grattan Gill. For the final project of their design studio, architecture students developed individual responses to Grimsbury's potential for a new, economically sustainable use which could benefit the greater Banbury community.

At my last visit to Banbury in early June 1997, Grimsbury and its site were still undeveloped, but the house is now reroofed and apparently weather-tight, and awaits completion

of market studies to determine its fate for the next stage of its life.

Collaborative experiences in England between Roger Williams University's historic preservation majors and architecture students have proven valuable for both. Certainly, our faculty have learned from each other. We form strong relationships, directly benefiting our students, with a multitude of architects, architectural historians, planning and conservation officers, developers, academics, archeologists, chartered surveyors, structural engineers, government officials, representatives from amenity societies, and the property owners with whom we work.

As this is written, Roger Williams University has 28 preservation and architecture students, plus one faculty member from each program, pursuing 14 credits of academic work for the fall 1997 semester in England. In addition to the extensive travel and site visits which are a vital component of the learning experiences every semester in England, the two studios this fall are working on a townscape study of Banbury. They are investigating three disparate historic properties in the urban core, the historic character of which is severely jeopardized by aggressive development intentions. With time still available to influence the planning process, we expect our students to again make valuable contributions in community service far from Rhode Island and their home states.

Notes

- * The listing status under the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

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Unless otherwise noted, photos are by the author.

Grimsbury House, Banbury, North Oxfordshire, 1836.

